

# PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION TO MARITAL BREAKUP IN MIDDLE-AGED PERSONS: THE ROLE OF GENDER AND TIME

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## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Marital breakup is among the most incisive stressors in adult life. While the negative effects of divorce on well-being are well documented in numerous studies, the large inter-individual differences in psychological adaptation to this critical life event over time are still not well understood. This is especially the case of divorces after long-term marriage, which have increased significantly in the last decades. According to the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective (Amato, 2000), the process of divorce sets into motion numerous stressful events. A central but controversially discussed question in this context is whether marital dissolution is a temporary crisis to which individuals gradually adapt or if it leads to chronic distress. But also with regard of the role of gender results are mixed.

### Aims and Hypotheses

The aim of this study is:

- To investigate the role of *gender* and *time passed since separation* in psychological adaptation to marital dissolution, which is measured with the indicators life satisfaction, depressive symptoms and perceived stress.

Based on theoretical insights and the status quo of research, we hypothesize that:

- Individuals with a breakup within the last 24 months show a lower adaptation to separation than those who had a dissolution longer ago. We expect furthermore, that individuals with a breakup longer than 5 years ago do not differ from the married control group regarding the indicators of adaptation.
- With regard to gender differences we do not have specific expectations.
- Concerning the predictors of psychological adaption, we expect that time since separation is a significant predictor even when considering several other variables such as socio-demographic and personality variables, social environment, contextual factors of ex-relationship and break-up circumstances.

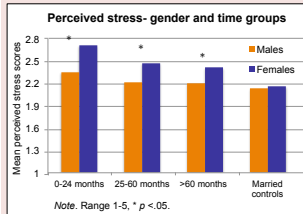
## METHODS

- Data presented were gathered in a first wave of the prospective questionnaire study 'Vulnerability and growth: Developmental dynamics and differential effects of the loss of an intimate partner in the 2nd life half', which is part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research 'LIVES - Overcoming vulnerability: life course perspectives' (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation).
- A random sample was supplied by the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics, furthermore participants were recruited by advertisement.

**Table 1.** Sample Description

	Divorced/Separated	Married control group
Age (M) (Range 40-65)	51.8 years	52 years
Time since separation	5.6 years	No marital breakup
Duration of (ex-) relationship (M)	19 years	28 years
n (women/men)	980 (608/371)	348 (189/159)
time since separation groups (women/men)	0-24 months (159/55), 25-60 months (121/50), >60 months (189/144)	-

## RESULTS



### Group comparisons with married control group revealed:

- Individuals with a separation more than 5 years ago reported significantly higher perceived stress, higher depression scores and lower life satisfaction than the married controls.

### Analyses of variance revealed:

- Gender main effect:** Women reported significantly higher scores on depressive symptoms and perceived stress and lower scores on life satisfaction than males.
- Time group main effect:** Post hoc test revealed that the time group with a separation within the last 24 months had significantly higher scores on depressive symptoms and perceived stress than all other time groups.
- No significant **interaction effects** were found.

**Table 2.** Predictors of psychological adaptation to marital breakup (hierarchical regression analyses)

	Depressive Symptoms	Life Satisfaction	Perceived Stress
Step 1. Socio-demographic variables			
Age	-.03	.03	-.07
Financial resources <sup>a</sup>			
more than enough money	-.25***	.31***	-.20***
enough money	-.13**	.32***	-.21***
not enough money <sup>b</sup>			
Gender (1=female, 2=male)	-.07†	.05	-.04
Occupation <sup>a</sup>			
unemployed	.06†	-.09*	.12**
retiree	.07*	-.00	.03
employed <sup>b</sup>			
Step 2. Personality variables			
Extraversion	-.06†	.09*	-.01
Neuroticism	.25***	-.14***	.27***
Resilience	-.26***	.28***	-.29***
Step 3. Social environment			
Currently in a relationship (0=no, 1=yes)	-.14***	.13***	-.08*
Social support (1=no, 2=yes)	-.08*	.08	-.04
Step 4. Contextual factors ex-relationship			
Happiness in ex-relationship	.08*	.06	.01
Duration of ex-relationship	.02	-.09	.08†
Initiator status <sup>a</sup>			
My Ex-Partner	-.01	-.01	.01
Both of us	-.05	-.01	-.02
Me <sup>b</sup>			
Status of ex-relationship (1=divorced, 2=not divorced)	.11**	.02	.08*
Step 5. Time since separation			
Total R <sup>2</sup>	.40	.35	.37
n	551	586	583

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Dummy indicator (1=yes, 0=no). <sup>b</sup> Reference category.  
†p < .10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

Indicators for Psychological Adaptation:

Life Satisfaction: Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985); Depression: CES-D (Radloff, 1977); Perceived Stress: Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983).

Predictors of Psychological Adaptation:

Neuroticism, Extraversion: BFI-10 (Rammstedt & John, 2007); Resilience: Resilience Scale RS-11 (Wagnild & Young, 1993).

Time passed since separation: Currently in a relationship; Social support; Happiness in ex-relationship; Duration of ex-relationship; Initiator break-up and status of ex-relationship: self-developed items.

## DISCUSSION

- Our results support the crisis as well as the chronic state approach. There is indeed a recovery effect: The group who had experienced a separation within the last 24 months differed significantly from all other time groups (higher depression score and higher perceived stress). However, the differences regarding the indicators of psychological adaptation between the separation group more than 5 years ago and the married controls are still significant.
- Regarding gender differences, our results suggest that males adapt better to marital dissolution than females: Women displayed higher depression scores and higher perceived stress but lower life satisfaction than males. The fact that male participants were significantly more often in a new relationship than women could be one of the possible reasons for these results.
- When considering several other variables, gender and time since separation do not play an important role anymore: Personality variables, financial resources, and being in a new relationship are the most important predictors for psychological adaptation to marital dissolution.
- Results will be validated with longitudinal data gathered in the second wave, which will take place in spring 2014.